

MEET MR. FANTASTIC

This comics movie role is really a stretch for Alex Hyde-White.

The acclaimed British actor Wilfrid Hyde-White, known to mainstream moviegoers for *My Fair Lady* and to SF fans as Dr. Goodfellow on *Buck Rogers*, was always big on the technique of acting. Consequently, the late actor's offspring, actor Alex Hyde-White, feels that if there is a Heaven, and his father is looking down on his turn as Mr. Fantastic Reed Richards in the film adaptation of *The Fantastic Four*, he might offer the following bit of advice.

"He would probably say something like, 'When you act, don't put your hands in your pockets,'" Hyde-White chuckles. "But, just look at this costume! Even if I wanted to put my hands in my pockets, there are no pockets to put them in."

Hyde-White has a low-key sense of humor, not too far from his father's British roots, that finds laughs and self-deprecating moments in the oddest places. Having just stepped out of a hot spacesuit, and a spaceship set where the temperature reached 100 degrees or more, he announces, "Actors often joke that we don't work for a living. But we think it's not work, because we're crazy." And no, he isn't finished



By MARC SHAPIRO

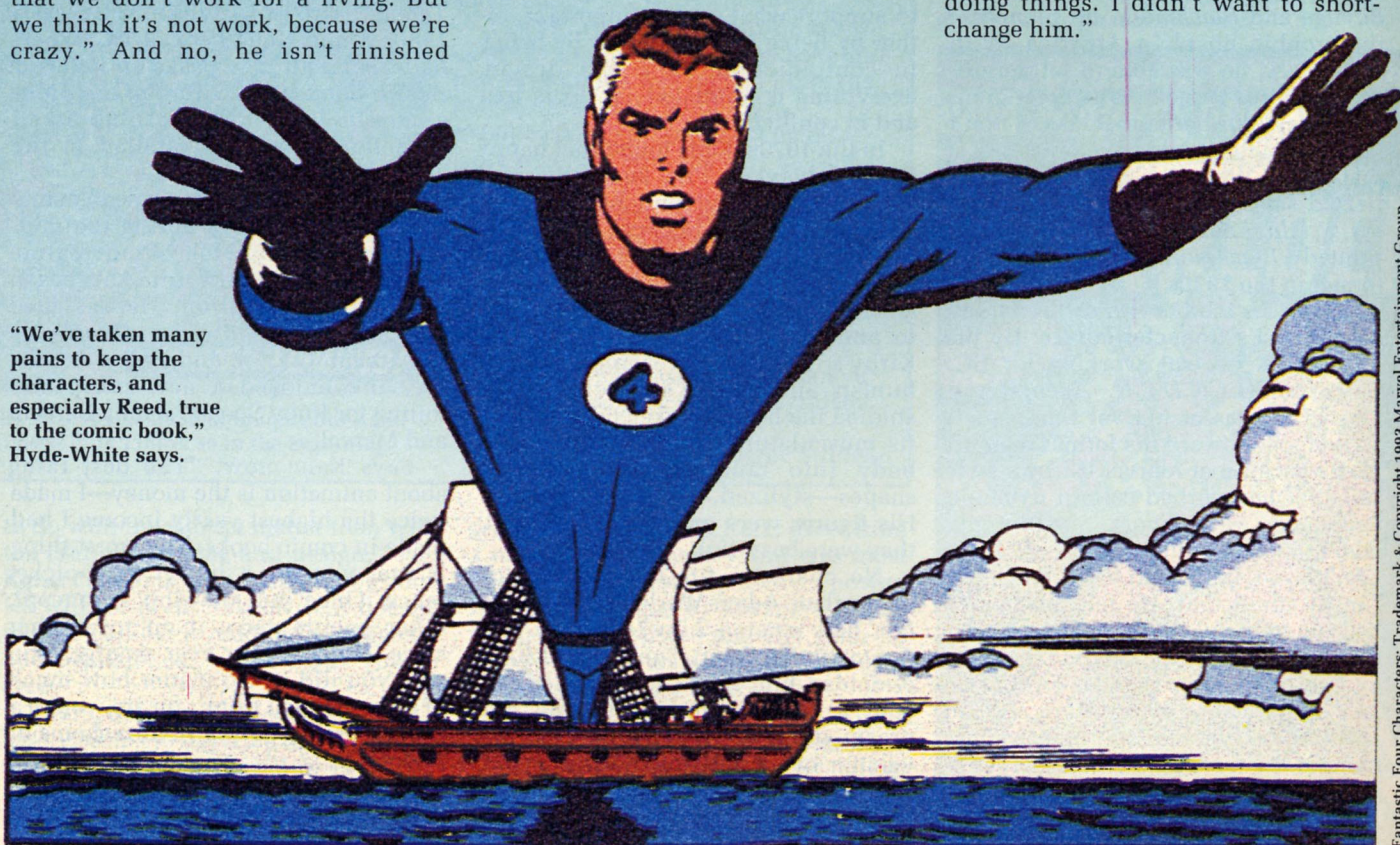
having fun at the expense of his spandex *Fantastic Four* outfit.

"I was very relieved that the costume fit. There's an old saying in the theater that, whenever you wear leotards, you have to make sure you don't have baggy knees, because that's all people will notice. Well, I knew this film would work that first day when I put on this costume and the knees weren't baggy."

But the actor, turning serious, also knew that Reed Richards was more than the usual comics role. Familiar only with the earlier animated series, he took a long look at the comics and the character created more than 30 years ago by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

"Reaching the acting conclusions that have to be reached about Reed isn't easy," he explains. "Anybody who's familiar with the complexity of the Marvel Universe knows that. Playing this character has definitely taken a lot of work. Reed easily has the deepest character arc, and it's to the credit of the script and the story that he has been given a pretty deep way of doing things. I didn't want to short-change him."

"We've taken many pains to keep the characters, and especially Reed, true to the comic book," Hyde-White says.



Fantastic Four Characters: Trademark & Copyright 1993 Marvel Entertainment Group

Art: Jack Kirby



Design & Layout: Calvin Lee

Hyde-White is confident that, through the action sequences, the encounters with the sinister Dr. Doom and his relationship with the FF's other members, fans will see the Reed Richards they've known for decades.

"There are always compromises that are made in a production like this one," he concedes, "but we've taken many pains to keep the characters, and especially Reed, true to the comic

Mr. Fantastic (Alex Hyde-White) and the Human Torch (Jay Underwood) confront the evil of Dr. Doom (Joseph Culp).

book. Reed has his inner struggles, and I believe the film makes an interesting correlation between his stretching powers and his inner conflicts of stretching himself too thin in order to please everybody.

"Most of the story in this film is basically the set-up. It's only in the film's

last third that we actually become The Fantastic Four. I truly believe that the most challenging moments for us, collectively, come in the first few moments after the transition. You have this group of characters going along with their lives, and suddenly something major happens to them. How the actors respond in those first few moments after the transition is what defines how credible we are as characters, and how important the event that just happened to them *really* is.

"Consequently, for myself, the first time Reed stretches was the most important and challenging moment in this movie. It had to be more important than anything else in his life, and I had to get that point across to the audience or the scene's impact would have been lost."

The actor is a bit bemused and befuddled as he attempts to explain the special FX secrets of his stretching powers.

"Technically, it's a three-part process. I move my arm in a conventional manner, they cut in a hydraulic arm that shoots out about six feet, and then they add the computer optical thing that allows them to do whatever they want. I don't really understand *any* of this stuff, but then it's all I can do to

Flanked by the faces of good and evil, Hyde-White eagerly promotes the film. "What it comes down to is the script and the director, both of which are quite good."

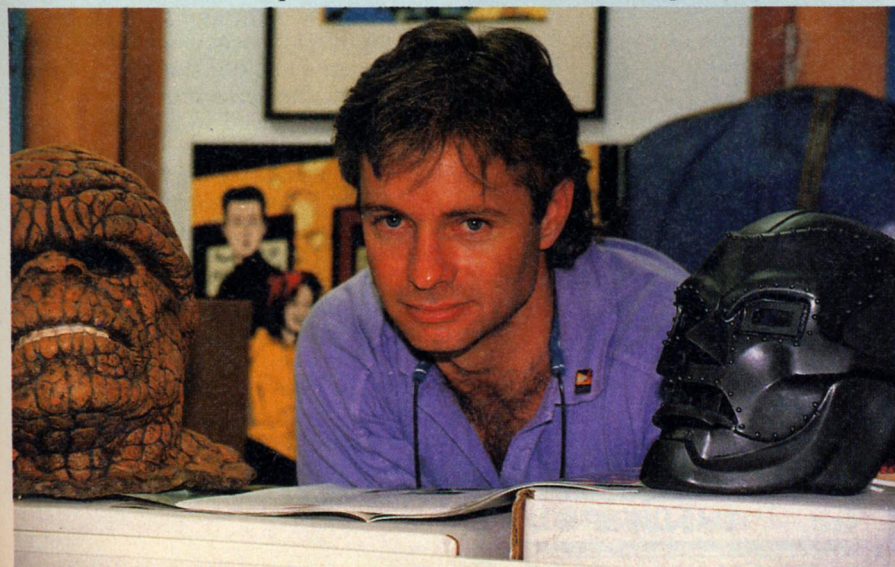


Photo: Maureen McTigue



Before the transitions, Reed (Hyde-White) and Dr. Doom (Culp) are student and mentor. Their changes push them to opposing sides.

keep my address book straight.

"Much of it has boiled down to timing, and learning what I have to do with my real arm that will complement the FX. It has been a slow process, but I've basically gotten used to it, and I believe the mixture of live shots and FX will cut together real well."

Hyd-White applauds the casting of *The Fantastic Four*, which, he says, "has brought together a nice mixture of newer faces and veteran actors who bring a lot of experience to this film." He offers, half-joking, half-seriously, that doing *The Fantastic Four* on the cheap and under the Roger Corman banner holds no embarrassment for him.

"There isn't the stigma of doing a Concorde film that many people would

have you believe. I'm certainly not cringing at doing a Corman movie. Hell no! You're nobody in Hollywood unless you've worked for Roger Corman at least twice. I've never been one to care about the studio or finances. What it comes down to is the script and the director, both of which, in this case, are quite good."

From an actor's point-of-view, he has found several aspects of *The Fantastic Four* particularly fascinating.

"One of the first scenes we shot was the wedding between Reed and Susan. That was interesting in that, by shooting one of the last scenes first, both Rebecca Staab [who plays Susan] and I were able to build on the relationship and courtship that would ultimately end up in this happy ending."

He also relates as to how his experi-

Almost getting his hair burned off was a *highlight* when heroic Hyde-White fought *The Phantom of the Opera* (Robert Englund).



Ending the film with what's really the beginning leaves an opening for sequels. The actor has no problem with that: "I would love to play Reed Richards again."

ence "doing big parts in small movies" came into play during a major plot point involving a lab scene. "Having been through this kind of thing before lent itself to a sort of unstated leadership role on my part, which was essentially the role Reed has in the film. According to the script, it was important for Johnny and Susan to appear to be hanging on every word I said. Now, for the character, that was appropriate, but the actor in me was instinctively wanting them to be individual and strike out on their own. It was a strange feeling."

Alex Hyde-White studied drama at both Georgetown University and the Actor's Center in London. He appeared in several stage productions, here and abroad, before coming to Hollywood in 1978, where he became a contract player at Universal, the same studio where his father (interviewed in STARLOG #47) would do *Buck Rogers* just two years later. He guested on such TV shows as *Hill Street Blues*, *Quincy* and *Battlestar Galactica* ("The Gun on Ice Planet Zero").

"That was my *first* Hollywood role. That got me started," he recalls fondly. "They would load us up into these orange crates on wheels and move us around in front of a blue screen. What viewers would end up seeing was the actors inside these state-of-the-art fighter aircraft that were added in post-production."



"I learned one important thing on that show. When the script indicated your dialogue as voice-over, *don't* believe it. I did, and so when we were shooting a scene in which I was flying, the camera rolled and I just sat there, flying the aircraft and not saying anything. Suddenly, it got real quiet on the set and I heard this voice off-camera saying, 'Kid, you've got some lines,' " he laughs.

High in the actor's memory list is his appearance in the pre-credits sequence of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* in which, as a younger Henry Jones, the only thing required was the back of his head.

"That, and a Scottish accent," chuckles Hyde-White. "It was easily the *hardest* audition that I've ever had. It was an important sequence, and they couldn't use just anybody, so I had to go through two video tests just to see if the back of my head was right for the part.

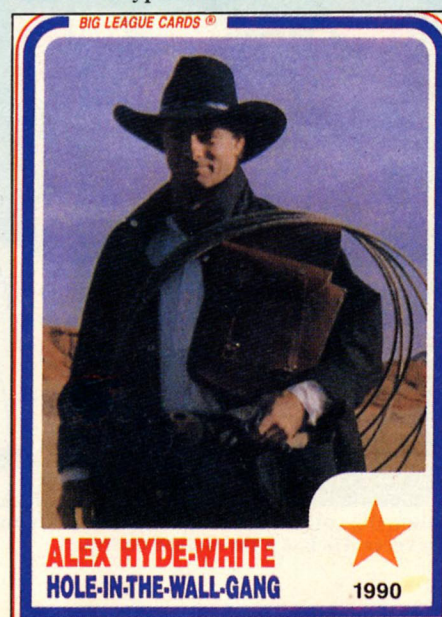
"On the day we shot the scene, they had this whole sound thing rigged up. River Phoenix would come in, say his lines, they would record it and then play back Sean Connery's voice. Steven Spielberg didn't want to use Connery's voice, but he had to protect himself. River and I talked it out and, when Spielberg called for rehearsal, we played the scene and I said the line, 'Junior, count to 20.' Spielberg turned to the soundman and said, 'Put the playback away. He sounds just like Sean Connery. Let's shoot it.' "

The actor's memories of working in *Biggles: Adventures in Time*, in which he plays a WW1 Sopwith Camel pilot, are limited to the fact "that it was my first lead in a motion picture" and that "it was great working with Peter Cushing.

"We sort of saved the world in that movie," he elaborates. "It wasn't a huge film, but many people seem to know about it and, in some circles, it has become a bit of a cult classic."

The highlight for the actor in *The*

Genre credits hold no stigma for Hyde-White, who notes, "The fantasy and comic-book stuff tends to be a bit more flexible than other types of films."



Phantom of the Opera (starring Robert Englund) in which he plays turn-of-the-century English theater patron Richard, was "working in Budapest and having to yell 'Christine' 25 times.

"Of course, there was my death scene at the end, where I almost had my hair burned off. That's the one drawback when you're working with a foreign crew. You don't understand when somebody is yelling, 'Look out, you're standing too close to the fire.' "

Time Trackers, the time-travel tale of a cop and evil genius who stumble into Medieval England, gave Hyde-White the opportunity to serve as fight director and "to wear long hair, and basically play out the whole Arthurian legend."

The actor is shocked that anybody remembers his very small role in *Captain America II*, a TV movie pilot (1979) in which Cap (Reb Brown) battled the evil Christopher Lee.

"Get out of here!" he howls. "That was such a small part and so long ago, I didn't think *anybody* would remember. I was just this guy walking down the streets of Portland, who gets covered up with poison snow. It was nothing, just this funny little bit. But, now that I think about it, that was actually my first role in a Marvel comic movie. I *hope* it's considered a growth thing to go from a small part in *Captain America* to the lead in *The Fantastic Four*," he laughs.

Hyd-White feels that his long list of genre credits has been "just the luck of the draw," but he does find great enjoyment in playing SF and comics heroes.

"The fantasy and comic-book stuff tends to be a bit more flexible than other types of films. In many roles, you basically have to conform to a specific way a character should be played. But, what I've found with things like *The Fantastic Four* is that there's invariably more room as an actor to move and improvise, and take the part to places even the script doesn't indicate."

In Reed Richards, Hyde-White feels he has found that kind of character.

"Reed's a real friendly character to me. I've really enjoyed playing him. Normally, it takes me a week of playing a character to figure out *how* the parts fit. But, for the first time, I felt an immediate connection with this character on the first day of filming. I felt Reed could be a part that's very close to me."

The actor has no problem with the idea of stretching out as Mr. Fantastic in any possible *Fantastic Four* sequels.

"I would be happy to play Reed Richards again," Alex Hyde-White states. "In fact, I would be pretty pissed off if they asked somebody else to play him."

